

**Chapter 27**  
***"The Fourteen Points"***  
(1918)  
Woodrow Wilson

**Introduction**

As American troops finally entered combat in Europe, Woodrow Wilson attempted to give shape to the nation's war aims, while suggesting the terms under which peace could be attained short of total victory. Delivered before Congress on January 8, 1918, this "program of the world's peace," which became known as "the Fourteen Points," transformed Wilson into an international leader of great moral authority. Clearly a great many common people in America and Europe shared Wilson's vision for the postwar world. When Germany finally sued for peace, its government did so with the expectation that the Fourteen Points would serve as the basis for all future negotiations.

**Questions to Consider**

- Why would America's enemies come to find hope in the Fourteen Points?
- How did Wilson think that his program would produce world peace?

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Gentlemen of the Congress: Once more, as repeatedly before, the spokesmen of the Central Empires have indicated their desire to discuss the objects of the war and the possible basis of a general peace. Parleys have been in progress at Brest-Litovsk between Russian representatives and representatives of the Central Powers, to which the attention of all the belligerents has been invited for the purpose of ascertaining whether it may be possible to extend these parleys into a general conference with regard to terms of peace and settlement.... The representatives of the Central Powers...presented an outline of settlement which... proposed no concessions at all, either to the sovereignty of Russia or to the preferences of the population with whose fortunes it dealt, but meant, in a word, that the Central Empires were to keep every foot of territory their armed forces had occupied-every province, every city, every point of vantage-as a permanent addition to their territories and their power. It is a reasonable conjecture that the general principles of settlement which they at first suggested originated with the more liberal statesmen of Germany and Austria, the men who have begun to feel the force of their own peoples' thought and purpose, while the concrete terms of actual settlement came from the military leaders who have no thought but to keep what they have got. The negotiations have been broken off. The Russian representatives were sincere and in earnest. They cannot entertain such proposals of conquest and domination.

The whole incident is full of significance. It is also full of perplexity. With whom are the Russian representatives dealing? For whom are the representatives of the Central Empires speaking? Are they speaking for the majorities of their respective Parliaments or for the minority parties, that military and imperialistic minority which has so far dominated their whole policy and controlled

1 the affairs of Turkey and of the Balkan States which have felt obliged to become their associates  
2 in this war? The Russian representatives have insisted, very justly, very wisely, and in the true  
3 spirit of modern democracy, that the conferences they have been holding with the Teutonic and  
4 Turkish statesmen should be held with open, not closed, doors, and all the world has been  
5 audience, as was desired....

6  
7 ...Not once, but again and again, we have laid our whole thought and purpose before the world,  
8 not in general terms only, but each time with sufficient definition to make it clear what sort of  
9 definite terms of settlement must necessarily spring out of them.... There is no confusion of  
10 counsel among the adversaries of the Central Powers, no uncertainty of principle, no vagueness  
11 of detail. The only secrecy of counsel, the only lack of fearless frankness, the only failure to  
12 make definite statement of the objects of the war, lie with Germany and her allies. The issues of  
13 life and death hang upon these definitions. No statesman who has the least conception of his  
14 responsibility ought for a moment to permit himself to continue this tragical and appalling  
15 outpouring of blood and treasure unless he is sure beyond peradventure that the objects of the  
16 vital sacrifice are part and parcel of the very life of society and that the people for whom he  
17 speaks think them right and imperative as he does.

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19 There is, moreover, a voice calling for these definitions of principle and of purpose which is, it  
20 seems to me, more thrilling and more compelling than any of the many moving voices with  
21 which the troubled air of the world is filled. It is the voice of the Russian people. They are  
22 prostrate and all but helpless, it would seem, before the grim power of Germany, which has  
23 hitherto known no relenting and no pity. Their power apparently is shattered. And yet their soul  
24 is not subservient.... They call to us to say what it is that we desire, in what, if in anything, our  
25 purpose and our spirit differ from theirs; and I believe that the people of the United States would  
26 wish me to respond with utter simplicity and frankness. Whether their present leaders believe it  
27 or not, it is our heartfelt desire and hope that some way may be opened whereby we may be  
28 privileged to assist the people of Russia to attain their utmost hope of liberty and ordered peace.

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30 It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be  
31 absolutely open, and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of  
32 any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret  
33 covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for  
34 moment to upset the peace of the world....

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36 We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and  
37 made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secured  
38 once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar  
39 to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made  
40 safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its  
41 own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealings by the other peoples of the world, as  
42 against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this  
43 interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not  
44 be done to us.

1 The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program, and that program, the only possible  
2 program, as we see it, is this:

- 3 I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private  
4 international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and  
5 in the public view.
- 6 II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace  
7 and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action  
8 for the enforcement of international covenants.
- 9 III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an  
10 equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating  
11 themselves for its maintenance.
- 12 IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the  
13 lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
- 14 V. Free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based  
15 upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of  
16 sovereignty the interests of the population concerned must have equal weight with the  
17 equitable claims of the Government whose title is to be determined.
- 18 VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting  
19 Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in  
20 obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent  
21 determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a  
22 sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing;  
23 and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may  
24 herself desire....
- 25 VII. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any  
26 attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations.  
27 No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in  
28 the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their  
29 relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of  
30 international law is forever impaired.
- 31 VIII. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong  
32 done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled  
33 the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may  
34 once more be made secure in the interest of all.
- 35 IX. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable  
36 lines of nationality.
- 37 X. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see  
38 safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous  
39 development.
- 40 XI. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored;  
41 Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan  
42 States to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines  
43 of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic  
44 independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan States should be entered into.

- 1 XII. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure  
2 sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be  
3 assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of  
4 autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free  
5 passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.
- 6 XIII. An independent Polish State should be erected which should include the territories  
7 inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure  
8 access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity  
9 should be guaranteed by international covenant.
- 10 XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose  
11 of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great  
12 and small states alike.

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15 In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right, we feel ourselves to be  
16 intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the imperialists.  
17 We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end.

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19 For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they  
20 are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace,  
21 such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does  
22 remove. We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that  
23 impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such  
24 as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block  
25 in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or  
26 with hostile arrangements of trade, if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other  
27 peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing. We wish her  
28 only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world-the new world in which we  
29 now live-instead of a place of mastery.

30  
31 Neither do we presume to suggest to her any alteration or modification of her institutions. But it  
32 is necessary, we must frankly say, and necessary as a preliminary to any intelligent dealings with  
33 her on our part, that we should know whom her spokesmen speak for when they speak to us,  
34 whether for the Reichstag majority or for the military party and the men whose creed is imperial  
35 domination.

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37 We have spoken, now, surely, in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An  
38 evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to  
39 all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one  
40 another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of  
41 the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no  
42 other principle, and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their  
43 honor, and everything that they possess. The moral climax of this, the culminating and final war  
44 for human liberty, has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest  
45 purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.

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**Source:** Supplement to the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, Covering the Second Term of Woodrow Wilson, March 4, 1917, to March 4, 1921 (Washington, D.C., 1921), pp. 8421-8426.